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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RPO DUBAI 000349

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [IR](#)  
SUBJECT: IRAN: TEHRAN SHOW TRIAL AGAIN CITES USG EXCHANGE PROGAMS AS  
"VELVET REVOLUTION" TOOLS

REF: IRAN RPO DUBAI 50

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyre, Director, Iran Regional Presence  
Office, Department of State.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The inclusion of USG public diplomacy programs and IRPO in a recent indictment read during the second show trial in Tehran is not a new allegation of US plotting for the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. Such claims have been made before, most recently in January, and contain many accurate details about the programs, but leap wildly to conclusions of intrigue and far-ranging conspiracies. IRIG responses to our exchange programs have varied, from tacit acceptance to obstruction to arrests and intimidation of participants. In the current climate, the inclusion of US programming in a laundry list of the "usual suspects" is not surprising, but it may reflect heightened suspicions of an embattled leadership. With the situation in Iran so unsettled, we believe it would be prudent for IRPO to delay any pending exchange programs until there are clearer indications of IRIG intentions toward the programs and the participants. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On August 15, Iran's Revolutionary Court held the second trial of defendants arrested following street protests over the results of the presidential election. Prosecutors read a 22-page indictment that described a far-flung conspiracy among domestic opposition groups and foreign governments. Included in the indictment were direct references to the USG, the Iran Regional Presence Office and its officers, VOA, and several NGOs that have worked with the Department. (Note: A copy has been e-mailed to NEA/IR.)

Round up the Usual Suspects

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¶3. (C) The indictment alleged, among other things, that Western powers had sought soft overthrow in the guise of public diplomacy because wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in conjunction with Iran's military power had made the military overthrow of the IRIG impossible. Public diplomacy and by extension "soft overthrow" sought to influence attitudes of the Iranian public toward their government and impose Western values to bring down the IRIG. Although the indictment accurately described public diplomacy and many of its functions, prosecutors went further in alleging that the aims of the US public diplomacy program was to create and broaden rifts between the people and IRIG, to

pressure the Iranian government to change its behavior and to portray America "as Iran's only savior." Participants in US programs were also intended as sources of information, analyses and intelligence about Iran, according to the indictment. (Note: The indictment also devoted considerable attention to the British Council, the British Embassy in Tehran and BBC Persian, even more than was directed at us.)

¶4. (C) The indictment specifically mentioned IRPO, two previous IRPO directors and IRPO's current deputy director. IRPO is "modeled on the Riga [station]" which was set up to engineer the collapse of the Soviet Union, according to the indictment, and its goals in Dubai are to attract the Iranian elite and convince them to act against the interests of the Islamic Republic. In a description of the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) run by IRPO, which included details on visa processing and logistical arrangements, the indictment noted that participants had returned "impressed" by their trips to the US and often volunteered to help with future exchange groups. Iranian authorities also seemed to have conflated public diplomacy programs with separate democracy programming in describing US regime overthrow efforts and referred to other Iran Watcher posts' in London, Baku and Istanbul as being involved in these programs. Additionally, Iranian authorities cited VOA, the Department's Digital Outreach Team, as well as NGO's Meridian House International, the Aspen Institute and Freedom House as having some part in trying to undermine the Islamic Republic.

¶5. (C) The IRIG has accused IRPO of being the instrument of regime change before. Semi-official and IRGC-affiliated Fars News published an interview with an unnamed counterintelligence official in January that was nearly identical to the details in the indictment. These details have most likely been gleaned from IVLP participants, who have either provided them in seeking permission from their employers to participate, and we believe

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that often this information is relayed to various security agencies, or during interviews conducted by security officers in Iran upon their return.

¶6. (C) This latest accusation also follows IRIG arrests of AIDS researchers, Arash and Kamiyar Alaei, documentary filmmaker Mohammad Ehseni, and Sylva Hartounian, an employee of IREX, in ¶2008. Arash Alaei and Ehseni were alumni of IRPO IVLPs, while Hartounian was working on a maternal and child health exchange. Another IVLP participant was subsequently harassed so much by Iranian intelligence that she fled the country, as she was no longer able to lead a normal life. Another former IVLP participant fled Iran, and was subsequently resettled in the US, after learning he was targeted for arrest. Other participants have had their passports seized and were temporarily banned from traveling outside Iran. During fall 2008, Iranian authorities obstructed four IVLP programs by intimidating or threatening participants so that they withdrew from the programs (reftel).

A Change in Attitude

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¶7. (C) In May, however, we heard from IVLP participants and separately through a contact with access to IRIG sources that the IRIG had no opposition to these programs. Arriving in Dubai to receive their visas, participants in three programs conducted over the summer told us that they had experienced no

trouble or harassment from the IRIG and were enthusiastic over the possibility of developing working relationships with their American counterparts. These programs proceeded without problems, even during the election and its aftermath, except two folk musicians sought asylum in the US rather than return to Iran.

Comment

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¶8. (C) The inclusion of our IVLP programs and IRPO in the indictment are supporting pieces of the IRIG's larger objective of presenting election unrest as a product of a sweeping conspiracy. They are convenient "evidence" of a US bent on "velvet revolution," and some elements within the IRIG -- most likely in the IRGC -- believe in such a plot, or see the utility in using them to foster such belief. At a minimum their inclusion serves as a warning to reformists and others who would be more open to better relations with the US at a time when the regime is under pressure from within. At the same time, there are factions within the IRIG who understand the true nature of these exchange programs. We have heard that there are those within the IRIG, specifically in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and even the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, who have been supportive of these programs or at least had no objection to them in the past. Our success in bringing nearly 250 Iranians to the US, including those who traveled this summer during the election, indicates that there have been conscious decisions by the IRIG to allow the programs to go forward, perhaps as a sign of Iranian interest in better relations. It appears, however, that after the election those who see them as a threat are again dictating the Iranian response.

¶9. (C) By the Iranians' own admission in the indictment, these exchange programs have been successful in their stated goals, and we believe public and cultural diplomacy continue to provide opportunities for engaging the Iranian people and even some segments of the IRIG. In the event relations improve in the future, these activities can be one of the most immediate ways we could advance a bilateral relationship.

¶10. (C) Amid the current raised suspicions and flux within the IRIG, however, we should be cautious in proceeding with further exchanges out of concern for the safety of the participants. There are real risks involved to anyone thought to be serving

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USG interests, and we think that right now, the risks have risen substantially in the current atmosphere. With the situation in Iran so unsettled, we believe it would be prudent to delay any pending IVLP exchange programs until there are clearer indications of IRIG intentions toward them. (NOTE: To insulate our public diplomacy programs and maintain IRPO's low profile, IRPO has had no involvement in civil society and democracy programs run by the Department. Our recommendation only extends to IVLP exchange programs.)

EYRE